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**The Irish Cause and  
"The Irish Convention"  
By Wm. O'Brien, M.P.**

**Authorized Report of Speech  
delivered on May 21, 1917,  
in the House of Commons,  
in the Debate on Mr. Lloyd  
George's Irish Proposals**

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**To which is added Correspon-  
dence with the Prime Minister**

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## THE IRISH CAUSE AND "THE IRISH CONVENTION"

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The Prime Minister's proposals are contained in two apparently water-tight compartments: The first is the Bill which the Government offered to introduce based on the severance of six Irish counties from the body of Ireland, and that offer could only be met by an immediate and unchangeable negative on the part of the Irish people. You may abuse Longford as much as you like, but Longford has shot the fox—Longford has killed Partition so far as the Nationalists of Ireland are concerned. The alternative plan which now, after the Prime Minister's speech, remains the only one—the plan of referring to Irishmen themselves the drafting of a Constitution for Ireland—is one which, if it had been adopted six or seven years ago by the Government, must to a certainty have led to a happy settlement so far as anything human is certain. That offer is one which, even now at the half-past eleventh hour, ought not to be dismissed by any man in this House, and especially by any Irishman, without grave and anxious deliberation.

Unfortunately the speech of the Hon. Baronet (Sir John Lonsdale), the leader of the Unionist Party, makes it only too plain that the Partition proposals of the Government, as to which neither of

the previous speakers has said a single word, remain far the most formidable danger of the situation in Ulster. That being so, Mr. Speaker, unless we are again to yield to the easy optimism and child-like trustfulness which have been the ruin of the Home Rule cause, that fact has got to be grappled with, and if you are ever to understand the real forces you are dealing with in Ireland—as to which you are deplorably—I must in frankness say deplorably—ignorant, you must not really expect us to forget the elaborate system of Partition which the Government, or rather their predecessors, attempted last year to force upon the Irish people. Our British rulers actually imagined they were soothing the national pride of one of the most sensitive races upon earth, while they were all the time wounding to the quick the feelings of every Irish Nationalist, and indeed of every other Irishman as well, with a degree of stupidity that was scarcely exceeded by the worst wrongs of the old times. Because in those old days at all events England acted with her eyes open and with the deliberate purpose to insult and oppress.

You persisted in that scheme of Partition notwithstanding the most earnest remonstrances which some of us could address to you. When the late Prime Minister went to Ireland after the Dublin rising—it was a pity he waited for the Dublin rising to go—the position of our own friends, at all events, was made absolutely clear to him, and it was this: Any amount of concession that would unite Ireland, but Partition, permanent or, as you call it, temporary, never! You persisted with your Partition scheme and you failed. The Government and those Irish representatives who thought fit to act with them were driven from the field by a storm of public fury and horror more universal, I think, than anything I

ever witnessed in Ireland; you had scarcely a man in the whole country with you north or south except the place-hunters, and the place-hunters very quickly took to their heels. That lively experience occurred only nine or ten months ago. Yet, here we have, or rather up to to-night had, the Prime Minister coming up again to offer us a Bill which in a slightly more gilded form is the self-same nostrum of Partition which was rejected last summer as a burning insult by almost every honest man of the Irish race.

The only difference between the two schemes which is worth a moment's discussion is the pretext that some shadow of national unity is preserved to Ireland by this so-called Council of Ireland. That device does some credit to the Prime Minister's ingenuity, but, Sir, it is of no more real value as a preservative of the integrity of Ireland than if you were to put in a proviso that the Hon Baronet and his Ulster men might still travel up to Dublin to attend the Punchestown races. The work assigned to this Council is too trivial for words. Indeed it could absolutely do no work at all without the leave of the Hon. Baronet and his Ulster Party in this House, who would command a majority of fifteen to six Nationalists in the Ulster delegation. The proposal is luckily too insignificant to be really irritating. Otherwise the only effect could be to add an additional complication by setting up a new and irresponsible dual control in Dublin to review and criticize every act of the unfortunate mutilated Dublin Parliament. I cannot suppose the Prime Minister really desired to add insult to the injury of the exclusion of the six counties by establishing the Ulster Party in this House in addition as a rival authority to snub the unfortunate Dublin Parliament at every turn. But the truth is, the whole thing is



so ridiculously unworkable that the only practical purpose of any kind it could serve would be to throw dust in the eyes of the American people and to keep President Wilson in good humour.

Sir, the essence of the Government's first proposal is Partition in a more insidious form. Its essence is a renewal of the intolerable insult that Ireland is not one nation but two. Whether our country is to be mutilated county by county, or by what, in the language of the butchers, is called the clean cut, the result would be to split Ireland asunder as surely as if what the Prime Minister proposed to us was to fight another battle of the Boyne.

Sir, we had no difficulty in telling you four years ago, as we are telling you now, that the Irish Nation will never submit to any such scheme as long as grass grows and water runs. What would be your own feelings if the Germans proposed to you as a condition of peace that you should cede to them—I won't say six of the richest counties on your southern coast, but that you should cede to them even temporarily as you say—even for five years—the smallest parcel of the sacred soil of England—say Westminster Abbey. Mr. Speaker, Westminster Abbey does not contain an ounce of dust more sacred for you than do for us the shrines and graves and battle-fields which we are asked to surrender to an Orange Free State as a visible symbol that the integrity of Ireland as a nation has ceased to exist. No, sir—better, as Cardinal Logue said, better let us wait for fifty years longer, and I tell you you will have to wait for fifty centuries longer before you will ever get the Irish nation to cut up the land of their fathers either by the clean cut or county by county, under some preposterous system of a majority of two or three hundred jerrymandered or corrupted votes.

I do not at all say that if the Irish people were to treat you as unscrupulously as they have been treated themselves, they would not close with the offer of the Government, such as it is, but they could only do so with the determination to work it in a spirit of sleepless hostility to England and to those Irishmen who might attempt to organize that abominable caricature of an Irish Parliament. Sir, the Irish people are not sufficiently good hypocrites to play a Machiavellian game of that kind, and it is just because we desire peace, and genuine peace, between the two countries that I tell you straight that for the few hundred placemen you might content, you would be making enemies of millions of the best men and women of the Irish race.

I know all your difficulties. Unhappily after the speech we have listened to from the Hon. Baronet they may seem at this stage all but insurmountable. But these difficulties are mainly due to your own feebleness and double-dealing—to the feebleness and double-dealing of the late Home Rule Government and their Irish allies. They could never make up their minds either to conciliate Ulster while there was yet time to do it, nor to enforce their own law under the Parliament Act. We shall hear plenty of complaints now of the speech of the Hon. Baronet, the leader of the Ulster Party, but where is the use of complaining if he and his Ulster men take their stand on the six counties, and take advantage of their knowledge that they never will be compelled to obey the law like other people? Yes, but whose fault is that? The Home Rule Government and, unfortunately, their Irish auxiliaries first offered them four counties, and then advanced their bid to six. They passed a so-called Home Rule Act with the public stipulation that it was never to be put in force with-

out an Amending Act, which would repeal it in its most vital particular. They passed it further subject to the solemn assurance of the Home Rule Prime Minister that the notion of Ulster being ever compelled to obey that Statute was unthinkable—Sir, to my mind, a monstrously unconstitutional doctrine. It would be the death of the first principle of all democratic government. But that was then common ground all round in every Party in this House except in our own small camp, and the foulest insults were hurled at us in this House for daring to make even the most modest protest. Sir, how can you be surprised if the Ulster men have now taken you at your own solemn word? You never proffered a single concession to the Ulstermen while they were still unarmed, and while even in this House they were still amenable enough to reason and to conciliation. Neither did you attempt to dispute their right to arm in order to bid defiance to your Parliament Act with arms in their hands. If we clear our minds of cant we all know that nothing happened in Dublin in the rising of Easter week that would not have happened in Belfast on a much larger scale if you had attempted to enforce the law there. It is all your own doing, and, unfortunately, the doing of five-sixths of Ireland's own representatives as well, and it is this miserable collapse of Parliamentarianism which is responsible for the Dublin rising—which is responsible for the Roscommon election and the Longford election, and which is responsible for the contempt and hatred of Parliamentary methods which has unquestionably taken possession of far the largest portion of the uncorrupted youth of Ireland.

Sir, I turn with relief to the Prime Minister's alternative plan which is now the only hope. No man in this House could like to think that the last



word has been spoken in this great matter of the reconciliation of the two countries which has been brought so marvellously far towards success. For my own part, a Home Rule Settlement, by the consent of all sections and persuasions of our countrymen, has been the one—I can truly say the one and only object of my political life for the past fifteen years. It is the only hope which could induce me to linger for twenty-four hours more in Irish public life, such as it has become. It would be affectation to deny that this alternative plan of the Government might well make the ears of some of us tingle with satisfaction because the Government have at long last begun to find out that the only real way out of the Irish difficulty lies through those principles of Conference, Conciliation and Consent which we have spent the last five years in preaching to deaf ears in this House. Our unforgivable sin was that we only counted seven against seventy in the Division Lobbies. But let that pass. Undoubtedly the declaration now made by the Government that to Irishmen themselves should be left the settlement of their country's legislative and fiscal future is one of the most momentous announcements that ever was made in this House. It is the resumption and the completion of Mr. Wyndham's historic declaration in the same sense in 1902, which put an end to the agrarian war. There are only one or two observations by which I should like to qualify my wholehearted approval of the general principle. The first is only as to a matter of practical procedure, but it will be found to be one of vital importance if the Government really mean business—if, as I trust, this is an honest effort and is not mere playing to the American gallery for war purposes. The Prime Minister unfortunately has made it plain that by the

term Convention he means the assembling of a large body of men. Well, Sir, that will involve you at once in almost insuperable difficulties as to the selection or election of the members. However you manage it the cry is quite sure to arise from one side or the other that it is a packed Convention, a term of not very fragrant memory in Ireland. For instance, the hon. Member for Waterford has just thrown out the suggestion that you should call in the County Councils, Corporations, District Councils and so on. Well, sir, if there is one fact notorious in Ireland it is that these bodies were elected five years ago and have long exhausted their mandate, and do not in the least degree represent the present state of public opinion in Ireland.

The selection of this Convention would in point of fact give you as much trouble as a general election, without satisfying anybody. Then even if you had this big Convention assembled, you would have no end of hot-headed partisans rushing in with their own particular plans and fads, and you would find it impossible within any reasonable time to reach what you require, which is a prompt, succinct, consistent and practicable agreement. This morning's *Times* wisely warned you that the analogy from the case of the more phlegmatic people of South Africa on which the Prime Minister dwelt is a wholly illusory one—not much wiser than the English bull which has suggested General Smuts as the principal personage in a purely Irish assembly. From my experience of Irish affairs, which is at all events one of considerable length, you will I believe find that the only possibility of a prompt agreement is among a small number of men, and that its success must depend not upon the personality of the men, but upon their agreement being of such a character as to commend

itself to the overwhelming sense of the community. The other observation I should like to make is that I hope we may take it for granted from the Prime Minister's speech to-night that the mandate of this Convention, or whatever you may call, will be entirely separate from the views of Partition that were to be embodied in the proposed Government Bill—in other words, that the alternative plan must be read independently of the views enunciated in the first part of the Prime Minister's letter. Otherwise, any Convention, such as you contemplate, if it ever assembles at all, will either break up on the question of Partition, or if it be packed with place-hunters will end in some Partition compromise, which will be repudiated with fury by the country.

Up to the last moment my friends and myself urged in the competent quarters as we have done for the past five years that it is not in this House but in Ireland the foundations of any real settlement must be laid. But we warned them that all our suggestions were based upon the principle that although a conference would of course, in courtesy, listen to any discussion, be the cost what it may, for your sakes as well as for our own, Partition in any shape is inadmissible and impossible. What we suggested was that the Government should begin by inviting a small Conference of Irishmen in Ireland, not necessarily composed of the leaders of any existing party or section. In this I am glad to be in entire agreement with the hon. member for Waterford, although he probably would not go so far as myself when I say the less the Conference would have of party leaders the better, because I am afraid it is not the Irish people but the leaders of all existing parties and sections who are mainly responsible for the whole mischief. I do not, of course,



make any exception whatever. I admit that the present situation in Ireland is one of mere chaos, and that nobody—literally no politician—is at the present moment in a position to answer for the action of the Irish people.

But it would be still not at all difficult to hit upon the names of a dozen eminent Irishmen—men of broadmindedness and imagination and toleration wide enough to embrace all political sects of our countrymen from the most moderate to the most extreme. If you could assemble a dozen such men around a friendly council table, they could be depended upon not to separate in such a crisis for our country without some great and memorable national agreement upon some such non-partitionist and Federationist lines as I have again and again indicated in this House and outside it. Let me add that the chances of an agreement would be all the better among all classes of Irishmen north and south the further the Conference would travel away from the existing Act upon the Statute-book, which has really become a bitter laughing-stock throughout the country.

Well, suppose you had an Irish agreement. We suggested as the second stage that it should be submitted to the Imperial Cabinet, including the Premiers of the Over Seas Dominions. For that tribunal there might now be substituted the hybrid committee of an Imperial character which the Prime Minister contemplated in case his Bill received a second reading under the presidency of some man of the type of Mr. Speaker, if indeed a second such man is to be found. Once you had secured an Irish agreement thus splendidly fortified, the democratic thing would be to submit it frankly by Referendum to the whole Irish people, and then



by all means place on the Irish people the responsibility for its acceptance or rejection, for under a Referendum the masses of the Irish people would have a voice such as they can never have under your nominated or selected Convention. If, as I am very sure, the response to a Referendum should be an all but universal chorus of acceptance and relief from every substantial element in the country, including the bulk of the great Protestant and Dissenting communities—well, then, let the Government do what the Home Rule Government ought to have done five or six years ago, let them adopt the agreement as their own, and let them publicly announce that they will if necessary go to the country and appeal for the sovereign authority of the electorate if any small section of merely irrational irreconcilables at either extreme should still attempt to block the way. I am speaking of a small and irrational minority. I do not, of course, speak of the Unionist body in bulk, and of course if you were to attempt Partition in any shape you would be dealing not with an irrational minority but with practically the entire Irish race, fifteen or twenty millions of them, and you would find yourself up against that rock of Irish nationality against which all the force of England has spent itself in vain for the past eight hundred years.

What I want the House to mark is that you have never yet tried any of the things I mention. You have never called the Irish people into consultation. You have never called the electorate into consultation. You have never offered any concession to Ulster except one which would call upon us with our own hand to take the very life of our motherland as a nation. You have abdicated the first function of democratic government in favour of the right of

rebellion, whether in Belfast or in Dublin, and if the Prime Minister's first proposal could pass you would be simply extending the area of the next insurrection to Derry and Tyrone and Enniskillen.

I don't deny—Mark Tapley himself could scarcely deny—that at this time of day you may fail to produce any general Irish agreement even through such a Conference as we propose. You have let one golden opportunity after another slip through your fingers. It is tragic to think that if the Government had only made their alternative proposal six or seven years ago, and if the Irish bishops, Catholic and Protestant, had only then issued their recent manifesto, all these troubles might have been long ago blessedly composed, and the whole course of the war might have been very considerably altered. It may quite possibly be now too late. But the point is, you have never yet tried it. That is the astounding fact, but fact it is. The Prime Minister's own letter confesses it, and fail how you might, you could never at the worst reach a more humiliating position than you occupy to-day before the nations of the world, confessing that you have incurred obligations to Ireland which you are in honour bound to discharge and that you cannot do it.

I am still not altogether without hope that a Government which had the grit to tackle all the might of Germany unflinchingly may no longer stand shivering before two opposite sets of extremists in the Irish seas. Unfortunately the Prime Minister's speech which, I am afraid, lacked a good deal of his usual magnetic attraction, did not afford very much evidence of the fearlessness and high purpose which alone can pluck a successful Irish settlement out of the dangers in which the miserable bungling of the politicians has entangled us. If you break

down now—I pray you not to delude yourself on this point—if you break down now, you will not kill the Irish cause, but you will kill any reasonable chance for our time of reconstructing the Constitutional Movement upon an honest basis. You will kill all Irish belief in this House or in any Party in it. You will set up the right of Rebellion, whether for the Covenanters or the Sinn Feiners, as the only arbiter left in Irish affairs. You will justly make Parliamentary methods even more despised and detested than they are at the present moment by the young men of Ireland. You will force the Irish people, sorely against their will, to turn their eyes altogether away from this Parliament to the International Peace Congress. I daresay it will turn out to be an equally hopeless mirage, but at all events, you will have left the Irish people no alternative except to haunt your path at that Congress and to join all the other small nations of Europe in a final appeal for freedom to that supreme tribunal of European and American democracy and humanity.





# CORRESPONDENCE WITH THE PRIME MINISTER

The following correspondence has taken place :—

10 DOWNING STREET,  
WHITEHALL, S.W.,

*13<sup>th</sup> June, 1917.*

DEAR MR. O'BRIEN—Pursuant to my statement in the House of Commons on the 11<sup>th</sup> instant, I now have the satisfaction of requesting you to nominate two representatives of the Party under your leadership who may be invited to serve as members of the Convention.

With the terms of reference you are familiar. I stated them in my letter to you of the 16<sup>th</sup> May in these words :—

“ Would it be too much to hope that Irishmen of all creeds and parties might meet together in a Convention for the purpose of drafting a Constitution for their country which should secure a just balance of all the opposing interests, and finally compose the unhappy discords which have so long distracted Ireland and impeded its harmonious development.”

I further referred to them in the House of Commons as follows :—

“ The Government, therefore, propose to summon immediately, on behalf of the Crown, a Convention

of representative Irishmen in Ireland, to submit to the British Government a Constitution for the future government of Ireland within the Empire."

I shall be glad to learn as soon as may be convenient to you the names of the gentlemen to whom invitations should now be sent.

Yours very truly,

D. LLOYD GEORGE.

WILLIAM O'BRIEN, ESQ., M.P.,  
*House of Commons, S.W.*

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MALLOW,

*June 18th, 1917.*

DEAR MR. LLOYD GEORGE—To my deep disappointment, the details of how "The Irish Convention" is to be composed confirm the apprehensions which I endeavoured to express in the House of Commons. The rejoicing excited by the courageous Amnesty for the Insurrection of last year cannot be allowed to blind the country to the danger.

1. While the Government have nominally adopted the principle of allowing the future Constitution of Ireland to be settled by agreement among Irishmen themselves, they have done so under conditions which render that principle a nullity. There can be little or no hope that a Convention constituted as the Government have directed can arrive at any decision except some hateful bargain for the partition of the country under a plausible disguise. To attribute the

blame for such a decision or for the failure to arrive at any better one to the Irish people would be little short of an outrage upon Ireland, and would be a gross imposition on the credulity of friendly nations abroad.

2. The proposed Convention would both be too large to make a prompt and carefully-considered agreement practicable, and too small for a National Assembly purporting to represent all the great interests concerned. The fact that the scheme excludes from any direct representation whatever the 400,000 Ulster Nationalists whom any Partition proposal hitherto contemplated would cut off from their country; the agricultural and urban labourers, comprising one-third of the Irish population; the great farming interest in the area of the Rural District Councils, and the Universities and other teaching professions—must surely make it unnecessary to emphasise the latter point.

3. While the politicians' organizations are in appearance restricted to a delegation of five apiece, the pretence is, to the knowledge of everybody in Ireland, a misleading one. The twin organizations of the Irish Parliamentary Party—the most powerful of the two being of a secret and rigidly sectarian character—would command a majority of the Convention as disciplined as if directly delegated by these organizations, and, in the event of "a deal" with the Ulster Unionist body of at least twenty-five delegates, would represent an overwhelming vote for some scheme of Partition, such as the two Nationalist organizations referred to strove hard last year to force upon the Nationalists of Ireland, and have never since categorically pledged themselves to renounce. Their leaders have, on the contrary, on more than one recent occasion expressed their

regret that the Partition bargain of last year did not succeed.

I do not impugn the sincerity of those who may believe any compromise would be better than failure to secure an agreement, but am absolutely convinced, for my own part, that Partition under any disguise would mean the destruction of the ideal of Ireland a Nation, and could not, indeed, be enforced at all without bloodshed and disorder.

4. The solid majority—apart even from the aid of the direct nominees of the Government—which the Irish Parliamentary Party would thus be able to cast in favour of any such Partitionist compromise—would consist principally of Mayors and Chairmen of County Councils, all of whom were the choice of the Board of Erin wing of the Ancient Order of Hibernians and of the United Irish League, and could not have been elected without the imprimatur of these organisations. This fact might not be material if the Board of Erin Hibernians and the United Irish League could still pretend to enjoy the confidence of the country ; but their leaders have owned that the contrary is the truth, and, as a matter of fact, have not attempted to hold a free public meeting anywhere throughout the country for more than a year past. The local governing bodies, like the Irish Parliamentary Party themselves, have outstayed their mandate from the country by several years. The greater number of those whom the Government arrangements will constitute a majority of the Convention would quite certainly be defeated if they were obliged to face their constituents at the polls. The will of the people is, therefore, rendered powerless to control the secret deliberations of the Convention, and would be forced to find other and regrettable means of resisting any such Partitionist



compromise, as there is only too substantial reason to apprehend.

5. On the other hand, while my friends and myself would welcome the most generous representation of the unofficial Unionist population of Ireland, the Government scheme ensures to the official Ulster Unionist Council a full third of the voting power of the Convention—under the direction, moreover, of a Committee not present at the Convention, but specially nominated by the Council to supervise its proceedings from outside. The terms of the Resolution under which the Ulster Unionist Council consented to enter the Convention make it clear that they have only done so as a War measure, and, relying upon the assurances of the Government that they need fear no Parliamentary pressure if they should adhere to their demand for the exclusion of the six counties as a minimum—a demand, indeed, which was conceded to them last year by the Irish Parliamentary Party. It is consequently obvious that the chances of any agreement by the Ulster Unionist Council other than one based on the separation of the six counties are all but hopelessly handicapped from the start, and the temptation dangerously increased to those Nationalist politicians who have already committed themselves to dismemberment.

6. As you are aware, my friends and myself have long since urged upon the Cabinet a constructive proposal, by which alone, in our judgment, any agreement involving a genuine settlement of the Irish difficulty can now be obtained, viz., a small Conference of responsible Irishmen, on the Land Conference model, to draft the headings of a project of Self-government for Ireland such as would guarantee a future of the fullest security and power

to the Unionists of Ulster and of the South as well in the government of our common native land; such agreement, if arrived at, to be submitted to a vote of the people of Ireland by way of Referendum.

Recent experience has convinced me more deeply than ever that it is to a small Round Table Conference of thoughtful and competent Irishmen, and not to a heterogeneous assembly, mostly composed of pre-committed partisan politicians, we must look for the materials on which the country might with confidence be called upon for a judgment, and that a Referendum, giving the whole mass of the population a direct and influential voice, would be the only means of eliciting a decision so overpowering as to put an end to all further controversy among rational men.

It is because I am driven to the conclusion that the Government scheme, while making a specious appearance of adopting the Conference method, in reality adopts it only to destroy its efficacy—because it forbids all reasonable hope of any agreement other than one which could only inflame and intensify Irish discontent, and because it would most unjustly cast upon the Irish people the blame for a failure of the Government's own producing—that I have made up my mind, with reluctance, and, indeed, with poignant personal sorrow, that I must decline to undertake any responsibility in connection with a Convention so constituted.

Yours very truly,

WILLIAM O'BRIEN.

RIGHT HON. D. LLOYD GEORGE, M.P.,  
*Prime Minister.*



